Indian Rose Annual - IRA 2018

Sri Mushti Lakshminarayana
A great horticulturist and rose grower of Vijaywada

Girija and Viru Viraraghavan

One of the great rosarians of Vijayawada and later, Hyderabad, was Mr. Mushti Lakshminarayana. We felt that it was appropriate that we highlight some aspects of his career as a rosarian *par excellence* in the hope that it will inspire and encourage the members of the newly formed Andhra Pradesh Rose Society to follow in his footsteps.

When we thought about writing this article about this yester-year rosarian, we contacted his grandson, M. N. Srinivas, who kindly sent us these biographical details:

“Sri Mushti Lakshminarayana was born on the 19th of June 1890 at Siddhantham village in West Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh. He was the eldest son of Sri Mushti Ramakrishnaiah Pantulu (Headmaster of a school at Bhimavaram who also, incidentally, started the first girls school in Bhimavaram). After completing his basic schooling at Bhimavaram, Lakshminarayana went to Chennai to do his F.A. (equivalent of plus 2) and then further did his BA and LLB from Madras Presidency College. He returned to Bhimavaram and started his practice as a criminal lawyer. He had a great passion for gardening so he grew fruit and flowers in his backyard. It was at this time that he was drawn towards the Freedom Struggle of India which made him quit his law practice and take a plunge into the Non-Cooperation Movement. He served as the President of Bhimavaram Congress from years 1929 - 31. He was arrested during the freedom struggle and spent 3 years in Arvankad prison where he came in close contact with many stalwarts of the Congress Party.

In 1935 after his release from prison, he wanted to pursue his passion of gardening and also wanted to lead a life which would benefit others too. He moved from Bhimavaram to Vijayawada. At that time Sri Kasinathuni Nageshwar Rao Pantulu Garu spoke to the PWD and had him allotted a piece of land for lease along the Ravees canal (presently where the Lenin Statue stands). Sri Lakshminarayana started a plant nursery "DURGA NURSERY & GARDENS" in

1935 on this land. Later, another 8 acres of land was taken on lease from the Durga Malleshwaraswamy Devasthanam where he started propagating varieties of plants like crotons, ixoras, hibiscus etc. It was during this period that he took a fancy to roses. During one of his visits to Hyderabad he found that the climate there was more conducive for roses so he decided to shift and bought land in Hyderabad on the National Highway No. 7, near Kompally and started raising varieties of rose cultivars which he gathered from different sources. He started grafting roses on wild stock and selling them at very nominal prices to all the rose lovers of Hyderabad. He was an authority on roses and shared his knowledge with who ever had interest in growing roses. Students from agricultural colleges would visit Durga Nursery & Gardens as part of their field visits. He was a true Gandhian and led a life as one till 1984 when he passed away at the ripe old age of 94.

Sri Lakshminarayana was 70 years of age when he started the garden at Kompally. My grand mother, Smt Kameshwari, who was about 63 joined him. Both of them with their only child Ramakrishna Rao started the Kompally farm from scratch (clearing a scrub jungle in a completely god-forsaken place).

My father Ramakrishna Rao a Chemical Eng. from BHU and a Sugar Technologist quit his job in order to support his father's passion."

(Mr. Srinivas continues the horticultural tradition – he is a landscapist / nurseryman, keeping the same name Durga Gardens, in Hyderabad, and has instituted a Gold Medal in his grandfather's memory, to be awarded at the Hyderabad Rose Society's Rose Shows).

It was our good fortune that we came to become his good friends entirely by accident. In the mid-1960s we happened to live in Nizamabad (a district in the present Telengana State, but in those days a part of the state of Andhra Pradesh, where Viru was posted as District Collector). Viru's official work brought him to the capital, Hyderabad, every month. The road from Nizamabad to Hyderabad crosses the village of Kompally, (where Mr. Lakshminarayana's farm was located) at a slightly elevated point, and then coming down and straightening to a railway crossing, after which was the turning to the mud road leading to the farm. A panoramic view of the rose farm could be had from the elevated point of the road – an astonishing blaze of colors. On our first trip to Hyderabad, from Nizamabad, we were so amazed to see this sight that we could not help but barge in, unannounced, to meet the owner of this fascinating place. Mr. Lakshminarayana, came out of his little thatched hut and greeted us with affection, though we were complete strangers. He was a very tall and well built, stalwart gentleman, very straight-

backed, and clad, as he always was, in pristine white khadi jubba (shirt) and dhoti. Of course the rose bond was obvious, and the bond became stronger each time we visited and spent hours walking around the farm. And we made it a habit to stop by, every month, on our journeys to Hyderabad. And in later years, when Viru was posted in Hyderabad itself, it became a tradition that every weekend, of a Sunday morning, we would drive down from our Banjara Hills house, to Kompally to meet the great man, and learn about roses from him. And we were delighted and privileged, when he began to visit our garden too, to see, advise, take cuttings, bud-wood and plants from us. And to see and comment upon Viru's rose breeding programme.

Under his expert cultivation the display of roses was indeed astonishing. Even today, more than 50 years later, we still recall the glorious rose plants he grew – a long line of the famous early hybrid Tea, 'E. G. Hill', in shades of pink and red, with a glorious fragrance, was a standard feature of the garden.

Mr. Lakshminarayana devoted equal attention to the old stalwarts – the heritage roses, as well as the latest introductions. Great roses of the past, like the two incomparable Hybrid Perpetuals, 'Hugh Dickson' and 'George Dickson', were grown brilliantly, as also the still unbeatable climber, 'Maréchal Niel'. The sight of this rose, climbing a simple wooden structure in front of his house (which was, at first, just a thatched hut and which then became, over the years, a tiled roof house) with hundreds of golden flowers, remains etched in our memory.

Among the more modern roses were Hybrid Tea varieties like 'Mme. Charles Sauvage' (yellow), 'Montezuma' (orange), and 'Mr. Lincoln' (dark red), to name but a few of the many he acquired and grew to perfection. Many of the roses raised by India's pioneering rose breeder B.S. Bhatcharji of Bhawan Bigha in Bihar State were also grown by him. As also the roses bred by Dr. B.P. Pal.

He also grew a wide variety of vegetables and other flowers. We can still visualize the many water lilies he grew. Age did not dim his passion and he could be seen, early in the morning and late in the evening, when it became dark, walking around his rose and other beds, making sure the bunds to irrigate the plants were in good order. His young (at the time we first encountered this remarkable rosarian, in the mid 1960s) helper was Jagan, who learnt all his skills of gardening from the master, and grew old in his company but well versed in all aspects of rose farming.

We cherish the memory of this remarkable man, with great affection and respect and are indeed honoured that he considered us his friends and his chelas. He richly

deserves to be a source of inspiration for the young rose growers of Vijayawada and Andhra Pradesh.

Copies of the original

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Mr and Mrs. M. Lakshminarayana

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Mr. M.Lakshminarayana, in a rare moment of sitting down

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At the farm